

Embracing Gaps and Strengthening Connection: The Lived Experience of Distance Educators in Research

Junwei Jia¹, Sheedra D. Futrell², and Amber Hughes³

Abstract

In this conference summary brief, the authors discuss the importance of creating spaces for collaboration in online research communities for counselor education. The authors connect the theoretical foundations for developing a sense of community for research, the importance of these communities and how to build and maintain the areas in counselor education. Finally, the authors discuss the disadvantages and advantages of building online research communities and these distance research communities and the critical role that diversity plays shaping the future of counselor education. This article is based on a presentation at the Counselor Education Distance Learning Conference hosted by Palo Alto University in February 2024.

Keywords

online research; counselor education; distance research; community; collaboration

The world of education is changing rapidly. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the process of distance education taking the center stage. As counselor educators, we are starting to collaborate with others in this digital world. Because of this, there is a demand to foster a dynamic online research environment. This article will explore the importance of such a community, its challenges, and its impact in the field of counselor education. In addition to reviewing the literature on theoretical approaches, we also share our experiences on how to meet the needs of counselor educators online.

Theoretical Approaches

Lamar and Helm (2017) discussed the importance of providing opportunities for doctoral students to reflect on their researcher identity development in their doctoral studies and how faculty members can create opportunities to encourage and have conversations about such reflection. This kind of discussion can start as early as new student orientation. Students may feel intimidated by the prospect of engaging in research with faculty and find it difficult to find similar interests that align with faculty. Because of this, students and faculty should recognize their roles in the mentoring relationship to encourage active involvement by all. This leads to Wenger's (1998) discussion about the community of practice's application.

Wenger (1998) emphasized the importance of shared interests and a sense of belonging in professional learning communities. Counselor educators can utilize this approach by creating an online research community that fosters collaboration, encourages resource sharing, and inspires research exploration. Counseling programs can use this approach by providing structured,

1 Corresponding Author: Junwei Jia, Northern State University. Email: junwei.jia@northern.edu

2 Lindsey Wilson College

3 Lindsey Wilson College

systematic research opportunities for students. Research suggests that educators' support and interaction show positive impact on students; also, educators can guide students to learn about educational technologies and the use of scholarly resources in the digital world (Dastous, 2004; Goldie, 2016). By acknowledging the importance of community in learning, counselor educators can help to build research skills in doctoral students who may not have easy access to become involved in research projects with faculty.

Significance of Building and Maintaining a Community

The integration of technology into counselor education and supervision (CES) has opened new considerations for research and collaboration. While traditional, face-to-face doctoral programs can rely on more organic interactions and development of ideas and research groups, online and hybrid programs must be more intentional with this process. Considering the communities of practice model (Wenger, 1998), the development of the community may be as important as instruction in research in terms of effectively supporting doctoral students, and in supporting faculty research.

The shift from counselor to researcher can be a challenge for many CES students and new faculty. Research in CES indicates the power of relationships in the development of CES researchers. Faculty members indicate the importance of relationships in developing research self-efficacy and identity (Preston et al., 2020; Wester et al., 2019). CES doctoral students have also identified relationships (Kuo et al., 2016; Lamar & Helm, 2016) as being an important part of developing researchers. The relational aspect of developing a research community of practice may offer some necessary support for CES faculty and doctoral students as they seek to expand and develop their research skills. Additionally, a research community can also serve as a support network for faculty and students working and learning remotely. It may also serve as an inclusive space due to the very nature of online learning. Online communities can bring together researchers from many different geographical locations, cultural backgrounds, and ability levels. As such, these collaborative efforts may lead to more comprehensive and impactful research outcomes.

Challenges in Online Research

As we reflect our research experiences in the online world, we have encountered several challenges. First, not everyone in the research team has the same knowledge and skill at the early stage of research and the educational session was needed (Erickson et al., 2022). Also, not all participants are able to purchase the same data analysis program. Second, scheduling a common time can be challenging, especially when you are juggling multiple tasks: research, teaching, and administrative work. Third, maintaining engagement is always the underlying goal. Erickson et al.'s (2022) research discussed more informal, less structured meetings like lunch hours, coffee breaks and game nights. Fourth, through the research, participants need to have time and space to discuss social justice topics, especially some elements like social, political, and cultural issues that are close to affecting our counseling field (Saba, 2000).

Overcoming Barriers in Online Research

Overcoming these challenges and fostering a vibrant online research community requires thoughtful strategies in several areas. When building these online communities, attention must be paid to addressing the digital divide. Online research communities must work on offering support and resources to educators who may have limited access to technology (Downes, 2022). Both researchers and practitioners may struggle to access the newest and most relevant technologies, as lower ranked institutions may not have access to as much material and supplies as bigger more established counselor education programs. This is especially true as some counselor education institutions focus on teaching while others focus on research. Moreover, these online research communities must strive to be inclusive of researchers with disabilities and minority populations to provide outside perspective to various research areas, which may enrich research outcomes and findings due to outside perspectives.

Members of an interdisciplinary online research community may find obtaining and maintaining consistent and thought-provoking engagement with other researchers difficult (Downes, 2022). Due to the individualistic and disconnected nature of engagement in an online community, members may find it difficult to locate these digital areas to discuss these topics, as well as finding these environments that foster thriving and interactive conversations. This requires buy-in from both the ‘members of the community’ as well as individuals seeking this engagement (Parsons et al, 2023). Similar to online teaching environments, these online communities highly benefit from a well-structured approach to community engagement. This could include regular virtual meetings, discussion forums, and collaborative research projects. Trusted leaders or moderators would need to be appointed to guide discussions, maintain civility, and facilitate productive interactions within the community.

Leaders of these online communities would need to incorporate professional development opportunities, such as webinars or workshops, as this keeps members engaged and provides continuous learning experiences (Parsons et al, 2023). Lastly, these communities would need to have a system that recognizes, acknowledges, and celebrates the contributions of community members as the ability to recognize achievements, publications, or innovative research efforts to motivate continued participation (Erickson et al., 2022).

The Role in Advancing Counselor Education

An online research community for distance counselor educators has the potential to significantly advance the field. It allows educators to collectively address pressing issues, conduct impactful research, and contribute to the ongoing evolution of counselor education. Through collaborative efforts, researchers can explore the efficacy of online counseling, develop innovative, pedagogical approaches, and investigate the ethical dimensions of digital counseling practice (Lamar & Helm, 2017). Moreover, the community can become a source of inspiration and resilience, particularly in the face of challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, by providing a platform for shared experiences and support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, building and nurturing a community while conducting research as a distance counselor educator is not only essential but also transformative. It empowers educators to tackle the unique challenges of the digital era, promotes inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, and enhances the overall quality and impact of research in counselor education. As technology continues to shape the educational landscape, the strength of these online communities will be pivotal in shaping the future of counselor education (Li & Su, 2021).

References

- Dastous, M. R. (2004). Bruner vs. Vygotsky: An analysis of divergent theories. Retrieved from chromeextension://efaidnbmninnibpcapjcgclclefindmkaj/https://www.dastous.us/pro_portfolio/graduate/Bruner%20and%20Vygotsky.pdf
- Downes, S. (2019). Recent work in connectivism. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning (EUODL)*, 22(2), 113-132.
- Downes, S. (2022). Connectivism. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 17(1).
- Erickson, O. A., Cole, R. B., Isaacs, J. M., Alvarez-Clare, S., Arnold, J., Augustus-Wallace, A., Ayoob, J. C., Berkowitz, A., Branchaw, J., Burgio, K. R., Cannon, C. H., Ceballos, R. M., Cohen, C. S., Coller, H., Disney, J., Doze, V. A., Eggers, M. J., Farina, S., Ferguson, E. L., ... Dolan, E. L. (2022). "How do we do this at a distance?!" A descriptive study of remote undergraduate research programs during COVID-19. *CBE - Life Sciences Education*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.21-05-0125>
- Goldie, J. G. S. (2016). Connectivism: A knowledge learning theory for the digital age? *Medical teacher*, 38(10), 1064-1069.
- Kop, R., & Hill, A. (2008). Connectivism: Learning theory of the future or vestige of the past? *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 9(3), 1-13.
- Kuo, P. B., Woo, H., & Bang, N. M. (2017). Advisory relationship as a moderator between research self-efficacy, motivation, and productivity among counselor education doctoral students. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 56(2), 130-144.
- Lamar, M. R., & Helm, H. M. (2017). Understanding the researcher identity development of counselor education and supervision doctoral students. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 56(1), 2–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12056>
- Li, D., & Su, Y. (2021). Online teaching and learning in counselor education: A 23-year content analysis. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 60(4), 316–330. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12219>
- Parsons, C. C., Hehn, M. T., Loudenback, A. J., Burke, H. K., Fox, A. L., Spratt, L. M., Brazile, M., Alarawi, R., & Zarestky, J. (2023). Cultivating qualitative researchers: Lessons learned during a pandemic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231157705>
- Preston, J., Trepal, H., Morgan, A., Jacques, J., Smith, J. D., & Field, T. A. (2020). Components of a high-quality doctoral program in counselor education and supervision. *Professional Counselor*, 10(4), 453-471.
- Saba, F. (2000). Research in distance education: A status report. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v1i1.4>
- Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems thinker*, 9(5), 2-3.
- Wester, K. L., Borders, L. D., Gonzalez, L. M., & Waalkes, P. (2019). Factors contributing to scholarly productivity of assistant professors in counseling. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 58(3), 225-237.